

WITCHCRAFT IN SALEM AND IN EUROPE.

By S. G. W. Benjamin.

THE colonists of New England have suffered a great deal of obloquy in this country for the persecution of witches. This has proceeded partly from those who were anxious to belittle the otherwise excellent reputation of a worthy and conscientious community, and thus destroy the influence of their religious and political doctrines. It has proceeded also, in part, from well-meaning humanitarians of narrow historical purview, whose horror at the crimes of that terrible episode in our colonial history leads them to indiscriminately condemn, instead of admitting the weight of palliating circumstances. There are many who would be only too glad to minimize the credit due to the stern but conscientious Puritans; while in these days of almost morbid sentimentality, in which it is almost impossible in some parts of our country to execute even the most cold-blooded murderers, many ignore the genuine and universal belief that once existed in the league of so-called witches with the devil. This belief was so general that it is a very strange proof of the tolerant intelligence of the Puritans that only one brief epidemic of the witchcraft frenzy can be laid to their charge, although in the country from which they came and all over Europe witches suffered the most horrible tortures and death, from generation to generation, and even for scores of years after the trials at Salem.

The universality of the *dementia* or belief in witches and warlocks is one of the most extraordinary phenomena in the history of the race. It has existed from the earliest periods. It would be beyond the scope of this article to discuss here the origin of this belief. But it is easy to see how Christianity for a time not only tended to increase this delusion, but decreed the employment of the severest penalties against supposed witches. The church accepted the Scriptures as literally true, and considered the Levitical law as

a guide of morals and the basis of civil codes. That law said, "Thou shalt not allow a witch to live." The church practically dictated the character of the civil laws which in many cases made witchcraft a statutory felony, to be dealt with accordingly. Could a period whose intolerance consigned to the most cruel torments and death hundreds of thousands of innocent martyrs for mere differences of belief be expected to deal out more mercy to those unfortunate creatures whom the wisest as well as the lowest of all creeds honestly believed to be the ministrants of Satan? And yet what incredible horrors resulted from this awful delusion,—horrors which confound one's faith and make one doubt the existence of a benevolent Providence directing the destinies of a suffering humanity! There are still some who like to dwell on the good old times as better than these. Let such consider that among the privileges of those times was a belief in witchcraft, and an excellent chance of being tortured to death for being in league with the devil.

It is a curious fact that this superstition gained force as Christianity advanced and the world grew more enlightened. Never was the excitement greater, never were the statutes more numerous or the penalties more judicial, than in the ages when such large minds as Luther, and Michael Angelo, and Shakespeare, and Bacon, and Milton were adding to the enlightenment of the world. It was another curious circumstance connected with the witchcraft persecutions that no rank or station was exempt from the liability of being accused; although it was chiefly the old, the maimed, women, and often mere children, the very class that one would naturally expect to be the last to suffer such wholesale cruelties, whom the law seized in its clutches and consigned to an ignominious doom. In all the hideous annals of the human race, there is no record so disgraceful, so inexplicable, as the witch

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persecution in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is inexplicable, for how can we explain the course of Sir Matthew Hale, one of the most upright judges who ever sat on the bench? In 1664 he condemned two poor girls to the gallows, and was sustained in his sentence by the opinion of Sir Thomas Browne, who testified as an expert; and yet Browne, one of the acutest minds of the age, had written a learned treatise against "Popular Fallacies"! This fact alone should greatly mitigate the censure which has been heaped on the memory of Judge Sewall, Cotton Mather, and others engaged in prosecuting the Salem witches. It is noteworthy that Browne, unlike our modern medical experts, did not swear away human life for money. His testimony was above that taint at least.

Witchcraft in Scotland received a great impetus from the interest exhibited by James VI., afterwards James I. of England, in the torture of witches. Papal bulls and a statute during the reign of Queen Mary intensified the mania, for they gave it an official recognition which stimulated the energy of the multitude. The superstitious were thereby encouraged to seek a remedy for every evil by attributing it to witchcraft; those who had enmities or grudges to settle brought accusations based wholly on malice, questionable evidence was more readily accepted by the regular courts then than now, and dignity was imparted to the entire procedure by the opinion of the ablest jurists, and the interest taken by the highest in the land to bring about convictions. James I. had a certain ambition to be considered a scholar. This was about the only redeeming quality in one of the most despicable characters that ever occupied a throne. In 1590 he made a voyage to Denmark to bring home his bride, Anne of Denmark. On returning to Scotland he learned that the witches had contrived a terrible conspiracy to cause his shipwreck, and those engaged in this treasonable plot were alleged to be persons in a station beyond that of most witches. James for this reason had his attention especially attracted to a subject which he always found a fascinating one. He himself engaged in

the judicial examinations, and personally superintended the horrible tortures to which the accused were subjected before the inevitable burning alive. To be accused was to be condemned. Rarely, if ever, did one charged with witchcraft escape. If one confessed to avoid torture, he was burned; if he did not confess, he was tortured until he did, whether innocent or guilty; and he, too, was burned. Ah, the horrors of those good old times! That James had such a passionate fondness for these dreadful exhibitions may be due perhaps to the fact that the witches, in order to mitigate their sufferings, flattered his vanity by declaring that the great object of the devil and his agents was to destroy the king, "by reason the King is the greatest enemie hee hath in the world." Among the accused at that time were Lady Fowlis and an estimable and an educated matron, Agnes Sampson, and Dr. Fian, the worthy master of the school at Saltpans. Fian was first subjected to the rope twisted around his head, and then to "the most severe and cruell paine in the world, called the bootes." His tortures seemed to have deprived him of speech after three strokes. The rest of the witches then suggested searching his tongue, and two pins were found there thrust up to the head; the "charme" being "stinted" by this discovery, he was released from the boots and avowed that he had bewitched several individuals. He was then sent to prison, whence he contrived to make his escape. But he was recaptured after a hard pursuit. Probably the sufferings the poor wretch had endured reduced his ability to evade his pursuers. The heroic victim of a diabolical delusion now recanted a confession which had been forced from him, and resolved, whatever might come, to protect his reputation and integrity. This resolution he expressed to the king himself. James, for whom it is impossible to feel any sentiment but the utmost loathing, then ordered the following awful tortures: "His nailes upon all his fingers were riven and pulled off with an instrument called in Scottish a *Turkas*, which in England are called a payre of pincers, and under every naile there was thrust in two needles over, even up to the

heades ; at all of which tormentes, notwithstanding, the Doctor never shrunk a whit, neither would he then confesse it. . . . Then was hee, with all convenient speed, by commandement, convaied again to the torment of the bootes, wherein he continued for a long time, and did abide so many blowes in them, that his legges were crush't and beaten together as small as might bee, whereby they were made unserviceable forever." In spite of all these torments, this true hero, in whom, as King James said, "so deeply had the devil entered into his heart," steadfastly refused to confess. Wherein was he less commendable than Cranmer or John Rogers? To end all, the poor schoolmaster was strangled and then burned. Those were the good old times !

Witchcraft continued to be rife in Scotland until the eighteenth century. The atrocities committed in Morayshire were terrible beyond description. The last official execution of a Scotch witch was that of an old woman at Dornach as late as 1722. Those who have carefully investigated the records estimate that, besides the great numbers who suffered by mob or lynch law for witchcraft in the rural districts of Scotland, at least four thousand endured torture and death for this impossible crime at the hands of the regular officers of the laws.

Witchcraft was feared and denounced in England for ages before that monster Henry VIII., of bloody memory, very properly supplemented the beheading of two wives and the proposed execution of a third wife by making witchcraft a statutory crime in 1541. In the two ordinances of that monarch it was associated with the pulling down of crosses and making false prophecies. Queen Elizabeth, in 1562, caused a statute to be framed exclusively against witchcraft, but limiting the legal penalty to the pillory for the first offence. It remained for James I. to educate the English up to a proper standard of opinion on this subject. His experience in Scotland, already described, had only whetted his zeal, and he actually felt himself to be an apostle and missionary appointed to exterminate not only tobacco smoking, but witchcraft. It is to James that merrie England is indebted for one of

the most infamous statutes in the laws of any country. Henceforth death was the penalty for all accused of witchcraft ; it was made a capital crime.

The result is easily foreseen. What had been heretofore a comparatively harmless delusion, viewed by some, Shakespeare, for example, as having its humorous phases, and severely attacked only sporadically and generally in outlying districts, now became a dreadful epidemic which cropped out in every part of the country, followed by a train of fearful frenzies and appalling tragedies. Every man's hand was, as it were, against his neighbor. No one seemed exempt from the peril. No one knew when his own neighbors or kinsfolk might denounce him. There sprang up a class of ghouls, like the notorious Matthew Hopkins, who called themselves witch-finders. They were legally authorized to ply their dreadful trade. They went from town to town. When they entered a place they demanded a fee of twenty shillings, equal to about sixty dollars of our money. For this sum they undertook to clear the locality of all characters whom superstition or malice had charged with alliance with the powers of darkness. The poor wretches were at once examined by this monster and expert, not only in witchcraft, but in all manner of torture. The examination included the following trifling amenities. The suspected were stripped naked and shaved from head to foot to find the witch's mark ; wrapped in sheets with thumbs and toes tied together, they were dragged through ponds ; if they sank they were released, if they floated they were condemned ; they were kept awake and incessantly walking thirty to fifty hours to induce confession, and endured other equally wicked torments. These tortures were considered simply preliminary, and almost invariably terminated with the gibbet and the stake. Thousands lost their lives at the hands of Hopkins. Butler in his "*Hudibras*," describes him as one —

"Fully empowered to treat about
Finding revolted witches out.
And has he not within this year
Hanged threescore of them in one shire?
Some only for not being drowned,
And some for sitting above ground."

Although the belief in witches had not yet died out, yet the time came when the public began to feel as if Hopkins had rather overdone the matter. A mob set upon him and dragged him through a river. He seems to have escaped with his life, but after that withdrew into a prudent seclusion like that sought by the Jacobin leaders after the Reign of Terror.

The murder of witches was often by wholesale in England at that time. In 1645 fifteen persons were executed at Chelmsford; sixteen at Yarmouth in 1644; sixty in Suffolk in 1646; and fifty-six in Huntington the same year. Chief Justices Holt and North, towards the close of the seventeenth century, were the first jurists who distinctly discountenanced the trials of witches, and threw contempt on the whole thing as an abominable superstition. Trials occurred after that, however, although followed generally only with minor penalties. But it seems almost incredible that as late as 1716, at the very time when Pope and Addison were at the height of their fame and influence, poor Mrs. Hicks, and her little daughter aged nine, were hanged at Huntington for bartering their souls to Satan, and raising a tempest by making soapsuds and pulling off their stockings. As late as 1751 the belief among the country folk was still sufficiently strong in witchcraft for a mob to drag an old man and his wife through several ponds until the latter was drowned. But the age for such atrocities in England had happily gone by forever, and one of the leaders in this last outrage suffered on the gallows. It was high time. It has been estimated by Barrington that those who perished under the statutes for this absurd crime in England was not less than thirty thousand, and that too in the land of Tyndall, of Shakespeare, of Hampden, of Milton, and of Selden. In view of these facts, is it not well to mitigate our prejudice against the witch hunters of Salem, and to marvel rather that, at a time when the wisest of Old England were holding such a carnival of blood over witchcraft, our New England colonists yielded but once to a superstition upheld by the church and prevalent all over Chris-

tendom? To their everlasting credit be it said also, that they never burned a witch alive at the stake, nor any other human being.

But if we are appalled by the annals of witchcraft in the British Isles, what shall we say to the yet more dreadful ravages wrought by that superstition on the Continent, where all the complicated infernal machinery of the Inquisition was brought to aid the malice and ignorance of the age? Matters were brought to a climax by the bull of Innocent in 1484, commanding inquisitors and all others in authority to destroy those engaged in the practice of witchcraft. A demon in human shape, Sprenger by name, and by disposition twin brother to Matthew Hopkins, was placed at the head of a regularly organized commission to see that the orders of the papal bull were faithfully executed in Germany. The terrors thus inaugurated were reinforced by further papal edicts in 1494, 1521, and 1522. Nothing more was required to produce the most dreadful results. It is difficult for us at this day to understand how authors and artists and philosophers and theologians could have continued to pursue their peaceful avocations, how people could drink, dance, and be merry, with such a scourge stalking like a pestilence through the land, turning neighbor against neighbor, husband against wife, child against parent, and undermining the very foundations of society. The commission prepared a codified system for procedure against witches, called the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or a Hammer for Witches. In the frenzy which now spread throughout the community, every evil was laid to witchcraft; and with the Hammer for Witches as their guide, the judges needed only to have some innocent being accused before them to pronounce the fatal doom. It was a curious feature of this persecution that it gave opportunity to practice in a very unpleasant form the Chinese-like prejudice or jealousy and suspicion which formerly existed in Europe against foreigners and travellers. They were often seized and burnt without the slightest adequate reason, it being sufficient to allege that they were travellers and as